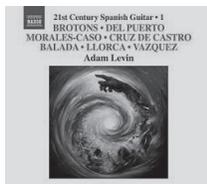


CD Review-Article:

Levin, Adam.

21st-Century Spanish Guitar.

Vol. 1 (Naxos 8.573024, 2013), Vol. 2
(Naxos 8.573407, 2016), and Vol. 3
(Naxos 8.573760, 2017)



American guitarist Adam Levin has written in “An American Guitarist in Spain” (*Soundboard* Vol. 40, No. 1) about his residency in Spain from 2008 to 2011, initially on a Fulbright scholarship, studying with Gabriel Estarellas. Recognizing the relative dearth of Spanish guitar music from living composers, Levin dreamed of creating a new generation of Spanish repertoire. He describes the object of his quest as the modern equivalent of the classic “Spanish sound” found in the works of composers such as de Falla, Granados, and Albéniz, whose works Segovia and his contemporaries transcribed for guitar, or of Turina, Torroba, Mompou, and Rodrigo, whom Segovia commissioned to write directly for guitar.

Levin makes no claims to be a latter-day Segovia, realizing that to expand the guitar repertoire on that scale would be an audacious goal for an entire career. Nevertheless, Levin hoped to launch his commissioning project during his residency in Spain, which ended up extending two years beyond his initial Fulbright year. During that time, he deliberately sought out relationships with Spanish composers, and made subsequent trips back to convince more composers to join the project. The result was the commissioning of thirty new works, to be recorded on four Naxos discs—an astonishing achievement in such a limited time. The first three of these discs have been released as *21st-Century Spanish Guitar: Volume 1* (Naxos 8.573024, 2013), *Volume 2* (Naxos 8.573407, 2016), and *Volume 3* (Naxos 8.573760, 2017), with *Volume 4* due to appear in 2020 (and Levin has hinted at a potential *Volume 5* beyond that).

Levin tells the story of his project in informative and entertaining notes in English and Spanish that accompany the CDs. The twenty-six contributors to *21st-Century Spanish Guitar* represent “four generations of living Spanish composers,” born in the 1930s, ’50s, ’60s, and ’70s, respectively. They are the musical grandchildren and great-grandchildren of the Segovia-era composers, with the intervening generation having been largely suppressed under the Franco regime, which “effectively halted the integration of contemporary Spanish composition into world music.” As such, their music is permeated with undertones of traditional Spanish sounds and tropes, but everything is filtered through a distinctively modern sensibility. “Not only are Spanish composers revisiting their nationalistic past,” writes Levin, “but they are pursuing

new and unique compositional styles with eagerness and dedication.” Guitarists who love the evocations of traditional Spanish music in the Segovia repertoire but are thirsty for something fresh and different will find it in this collection. Indeed, it would be a surprise if some of them do not find their way into the classical guitar canon of future generations (unless future generations dispense with the need for a canon altogether...).

The composer who has contributed most substantially to Levin’s project is Leonardo Balada, whose four sets of *Abstractions* each pay tribute to works by a different Spanish composer. These sets are themselves part of Balada’s larger series of solo or chamber works for various instruments called *Caprichos* (specifically, *Caprichos No. 8, 11, 12, and 14*). Most of these “abstractions” are quite short, lasting just a minute or two. Each movement refracts its model through a modern lens to produce a sonic image which is distorted yet still clearly recognizable. Balada treats the same melodic motives with a kaleidoscopic variety of textures and colors—what Levin calls “ingeniously contrasting aleatoric technical fêtes.” This textural fecundity epitomizes, perhaps more than any other composer’s work, the fascinating quality of the music Levin has commissioned throughout his project. The first of Balada’s four sets, *Abstractions of Albéniz* (recorded on Volume 1), quotes from five movements from Albéniz’s *Iberia* and *Suite española*. In “Abstraction of Sevilla,” the festive *sevillanas* rhythm is drawn out into bursts of ebullient rasgueado chords which then seem to hang suspended in midair. “Abstraction of Evocación” stands out as one of the most unusual textures, beginning with the crystalline sounds of plucking on the wrong side of the nut, with the rest of the movement entirely in artificial harmonics.

On Volume 2, Balada treats five of Granados’ *Danzas Españolas*, many of which are well-known in guitar or guitar duo transcriptions. Most notably, “Abstractions of Danza Española No. 5” opens with artificial harmonics, and once again playing on the wrong side of the nut (as with “Abstraction of Evocación”), melting into phrases of lyrical melody interspersed with repeated chords including the characteristic minor second from Granados’ original. “Abstractions of Danza Española No. 2” starts much slower than the original but constantly gathers momentum to reach a breakneck pace by the end. “Abstractions of Danza Española No. 10” features mercurial shifts between rasgueado, block chords, powerful double-dotted rhythms, and tremolo textures.

Volume 3 includes the third installment, *Abstractions of “El Amor Brujo” of Falla*, which quotes four movements from de Falla’s ballet, already the inspiration for one of the warhorses of the guitar repertoire in Rodrigo’s *Invocación y Danza*. This set is perhaps the least “abstracted” of the three

REVIEWS: (cont.)

released so far, as the motives and textures from the original ballet are only thinly veiled, and Balada's reinterpretation retains its dark and mysterious aura. The use of pizzicato in "Abstractions of Danza del Juego de Amor" is particularly effective in evoking an orchestral weight and timbre, as are the rasgueados in "Abstractions of Danza Ritual del Fuego." With these masterful tributes to the Spanish repertoire already on display, the release of Balada's fourth and final commission from Levin, *Abstractions of "Concierto de Aranjuez,"* should be a much-anticipated event.

As space does not allow for a thorough survey of the panoply of new works Levin has presented, I will simply mention a few of the more memorable highlights. In Volume 1, Carlos Cruz de Castro's *Secuencia Sefardita*, based on a Sephardic melody, starts with a repeated note in the upper reaches of the fingerboard, gradually cascading down to a repeated low note, which morphs into repeated motoric hammer-ons, and maniacal percussive tapping all over the fingerboard. At other times, it appears as an insistent tremolo accompaniment to a nervous melody or a continuous rolling rasgueado. These intricate textures alternate with free and lyrical phrases from the Sephardic tune.

Another piece explicitly referencing the music of the past is *Handeliana* by Ricardo Llorca. A complete arrangement of a Handel aria, exuding proper Baroque grandeur, leads to a series of transformative variations (or perhaps "reflections," in the mode of Britten's *Nocturnal* as "Reflections on John Dowland"). Although the original tune is antique but not specifically Spanish, the variations evoke the chivalric atmosphere of old Spain, following in the footsteps of Rodrigo, especially with devices such as harmonizing a melody with sharp dissonances.

Octavio Vázquez's *Suite: Nostos*, the title of which means "homecoming" in Greek, suggests a narrative drama laden with pathos, danger, and of course nostalgia—an Odyssey in miniature. The movement "There was an apple tree" opens the suite with a gentle melody over swaying arpeggios or echo-like repeated chords. The etude-like "Intermezzo" has jazz-influenced harmonies sandwiched around a lugubrious melody that switches octaves while remaining a single line. "The exact day" is a little funeral march, followed by a fiery "Gigue" which explores far-flung tonal areas, building up to a brilliant tremolo and rasgueado climax, and then a lyrical, poignant bass "Melody." The final movement, "The rest is memory," brings the drama to a satisfying denouement by integrating textural elements from all the other movements.

One of the highlights of Volume 2 is Juan Manuel Ruiz's *Orión*, inspired by "the night sky's brightest constellation, Orion." The piece begins with a sustained passage of intense, dissonant rasgueado chords, which

eventually disintegrate into mysterious pizzicato, percussive, or harmonic sounds skittering off into silence, evoking the vast interstellar reaches of the constellation. This space is populated by strange and luminous objects constructed from surreptitious trills, crystalline chords, muted sounds, glissando, and *tambora*—an array of fantastic nebulae and star systems. Eventually the opening rasgueados and repeated chords start to loom on the horizon again, coalescing out of tremolo and extended left-hand slurs. Another intense blaze of sound floats ever higher and dies out beyond the fingerboard.

On the third volume of the collection, *Espacio de guitarra* by Cristóbal Halffter is built on a haunting chime-like chord. The piece opens with the chimes tolling, gradually gathering other elements over them, and eventually launching into more forward motion, but never disappearing completely from the sonic "space." In the center of the piece, passionate outbursts of rasgueado contrast with languid *campanella* melodies wandering back and forth. Eventually these die away and the chimes return, signifying for Levin "a palpable sense of humanity, noble purpose, and alas, mortality."

Volume 3 closes with the suite *Sweet as Candy: 7 flavors for guitar* by Spanish-American composer José Luis Greco. Greco was born in New York City, and this music seems to have grown up in the New World more than the Old. Each brief movement lays down an ingenious and memorable textural "flavor," inviting the listener to savor it before it melts away. Some movements evoke film or game music ("Mystery" features delicate harmonics over a finely-spun left-hand slur ostinato, while the gently rippling rolled chords of "Ocean" create a palpable sense of swelling waves), while other movements reference American popular styles (the peppy "Hillbilly" could be a transfiguration of country music, and "Thriller" has a repetitive pulse in the bass like a rock bass riff). "Home at Last" brings the set to a relaxed conclusion, with a simple melody over repeated notes humming along like a well-regulated machine.

With Levin's spirited and energetic playing and rich timbral palette, perfectly captured on disc by Norbert Kraft and Bonnie Silver, these recordings are a delight to listen to. To amplify the pleasure even further, Levin has also commissioned exquisite cover art by Cuban painter Leo d'Lázaro, inspired by a piece from each album. I am eager to welcome the release of *21st-Century Spanish Guitar: Volume 4* next year, and then to hear other guitarists begin to incorporate this new generation of masterpieces into their repertoire. Adam Levin has given the classical guitar a marvelous gift, bringing its treasured Spanish heritage decisively into the twenty-first century while honoring the legacy of the nineteenth and early twentieth.

—NATHAN CORNELIUS